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ABSTRACT

Frequently, adults organize and implement youth projects without involving youth in the process. However, youth should be involved in problem identification and program design because they understand the needs of their peers and how to reach them effectively. This paper examines youth participation as a process for bringing about effective youth development. A literature review examines six areas that need to be developed during adolescence, youth problems that arise when developmental needs are unmet, and benefits of youth participation in projects. A "ladder" (R. Hart, 1992) of youth participation has eight levels: manipulation; decoration; tokenism; assigned but informed; young people consulted and informed; adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people; young person-initiated and directed; and young person-initiated, shared decisions. Three case studies illustrate youth participation principles. In 1992, Fundacion Esquel-Ecuador started Ecuadorian youth forums that have involved approximately 15,000 youth from low-income neighborhoods and other organizations; function regularly in four cities and at the national level; and have presented youth concerns to presidential candidates in the areas of education, work, violence, and poverty. In Mexico, the Gente Joven program recruited volunteers, aged 16-20, to promote sex education at outreach sites and to assist in production of program materials. A Bolivian nongovernmental organization that aids public schools helped youth who came from traditional cultures and spoke Aymara to organize Asociacion Estudiantil MINKA and provided leadership training to 25 youth. MINKA is promoting the value of indigenous culture in the schools, has organized cultural activities and educational events, and has helped to restore cultural pride through critical discussion. The case studies demonstrate that at higher levels on Hart's ladder, youth have more opportunities to develop needed competencies. (SV)

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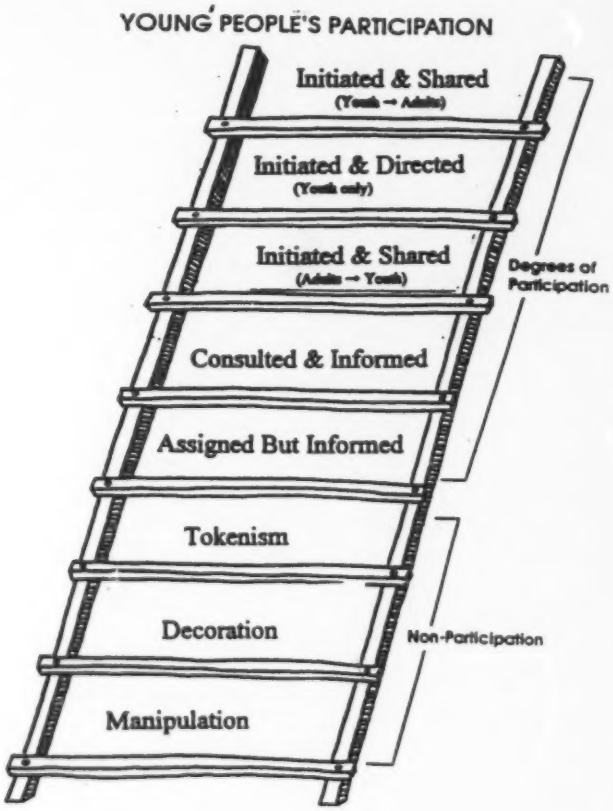
Youth Participation in Youth Development



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December 17, 1996

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Youth Participation in Youth Development
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Youth Participation in Youth Development

I. Statement of Problem

In the international development field, people involved in the development process are often viewed as passive beneficiaries, rather than active participants. This may explain why development projects often do not succeed due to the lack of ownership people feel towards these projects. In addition, this attitude creates a sense of dependency on the individuals organizing the projects. This defeats the purpose of development as a process of empowerment because it fails to involve the people that it intends to help. People's participation in the design and implementation of the development process encourages them to feel a sense of ownership, and also gain experience through the process of participation. This process, if practiced effectively, can lead not only to empowerment of the individual, through the knowledge and psychological fulfillment gained, but also lead to empowerment of the local community through the articulation and realization of its goals.

Similarly in the field of youth development, adults organize and implement projects, but often do not involve youth in the process. Youth are perceived as lacking the maturity to contribute effectively to projects. However, youth, especially need to be involved in the problem identification and program design process because they understand the needs of their peers and the manner in which they can be reached effectively. Just as in international development, the process of youth participation benefits the individual, the organization, and the local community. The individual benefits from the learning process of participation, and a sense of connectedness; while the organization and community benefit from the effectiveness of the projects.

This paper examines youth participation as a process for bringing about effective youth development. The first section of the paper provides a theoretical foundation for understanding youth participation--its various levels, strengths, and limitations. The second section uses three case studies to illustrate the practical application of the youth participation model. The need for this research paper stems from the current lack of youth participation in most youth development projects. This paper provides an understanding of the theoretical foundation and practical application of youth participation in youth development projects. The main hypothesis of this paper is that if youth can effectively participate in the development process, they will benefit both themselves, their organization and their community.

II. Organization of Study

The study is organized into two main sections: Theoretical Foundation of Youth Participation and Practical Application of Youth Participation: Three Case Studies. The methodology involved doing a survey of the literature on youth participation, and then consulting with various youth development organizations, such as the International Youth Foundation, Advocates for Youth and the Inter-American Foundation, which provided case studies of programs that have successfully incorporated youth participation. This methodology proved to be effective and balanced because it provided both an academic understanding of youth participation, as well as the practical application of this idea through the case studies.

III. Review of Literature

In examining the literature on youth participation, I encountered a series of articles published in the 1991 issue of *Future Choices* magazine. Karen Pittman wrote the main article titled "A Framework for Defining and Promoting Youth Participation." The other four authors wrote responses to Pittman's article allowing for a critical discussion of issues related to youth participation. Kim McGillicuddy's article raised interesting issues about the importance of youth participation at both the individual and community levels.

Edward Potter of the International Youth Foundation and Michael McCabe of the Inter-American Foundation provided the case study information on organizations that are effectively incorporating youth participation. The paper includes the following three case studies: Gente Joven (Young People) in Mexico, Youth Forums in Ecuador, and MINKA/CEMSE (Centro de Multiservicios Educativos) in Bolivia. All three case studies highlight different aspects of youth participation at varying levels. Gente Joven incorporates youth by allowing them to participate as promoters who educate their peers about reproductive health care. Youth are also actively involved in the creation of promotional literature and videos. Youth Forums in Ecuador provide an opportunity for youth to voice their concerns to each other and their communities. Finally, the CEMSE program's MINKA initiative allows youth representatives to help govern the organization, and also organize cultural and educational activities. The literature cited in this paper helps to provide a strong theoretical and practical foundation for understanding various aspects of youth participation.

IV. Theoretical Foundation of Youth Participation

The process of youth development helps young people meet their basic human and developmental needs and achieve required competencies to transition successfully into adulthood. (Cahill, 4) In her paper, Virginia Gobeli discusses the basic human needs outlined in the human development literature. These include, a sense of safety and structure; sense of group belonging; sense of self worth; sense of independence and control over one's life; a sense of closeness through relationships; and a sense of competency. (4) The attainment of human needs can promote or discourage the acquisition of competencies. The six competencies that need to be developed during adolescence, include the following:

1. Physical development-understanding and maintaining one's body;
2. Cognitive development-critical thinking, planning, and expressing oneself clearly;
3. Emotional development-expressing one's feelings and shaping one's behavior;
4. Interpersonal/Social development-developing friendships and relationships;
5. Moral development/Citizenship-understanding rights and responsibilities;
6. Vocational development-acquiring necessary skills in order to work.

(Cahill and Gabone, 1993)

Problems related to youth development occur when the youth's needs and competencies are not adequately met. For example, when adolescents feel a sense of disconnectedness from their families and their communities, they often resort to drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and gang membership. However, their attempts to satisfy their needs through these ephemeral alternatives often prevents them from acquiring competencies,

and creates more problems for them, their families and their communities.

In order to address these problems, a more comprehensive approach that views youth as part of the solution, rather than the problem, needs to be developed. After all, if the youth's family and community were able to fulfill their needs and help them acquire the main competencies, they would probably not be afflicted by problems. "Instead of referring to the program or target audience with "problem words"--such as drug, pregnancy or drop-out prevention, children of alcoholics, or "high risk"--accentuate what is positive and creative." (McGillicuddy, 97) McGillicuddy adds that programs should concentrate "...on building upon youth's strengths rather than correcting their deficits or re-programming their behavior. Many youth will avoid going to a program that gives them a negative reputation and further stereotypes them." (97)

Youth participation in youth development projects offers youth the opportunity to develop their competencies. Benard suggests that participation addresses the need for belonging, self-esteem and independence. (22) In the absence of adequate youth development programs, marginalized youth often turn to gangs to fulfill these needs. McGillicuddy emphasizes that youth must play an important role in the creation of their community or they will become alienated and isolated, and play a role in their community's destruction by forming their own alternative communities such as gangs. When youth want leadership opportunities they often seek them in gangs. "These experts maintain emphatically that the needs of young people can be met in positive ways, and the voids that gangs previously filled can be occupied by service or other constructive activities." (Jueds, 123) Gang membership, not only provides youth a sense of belonging, but also

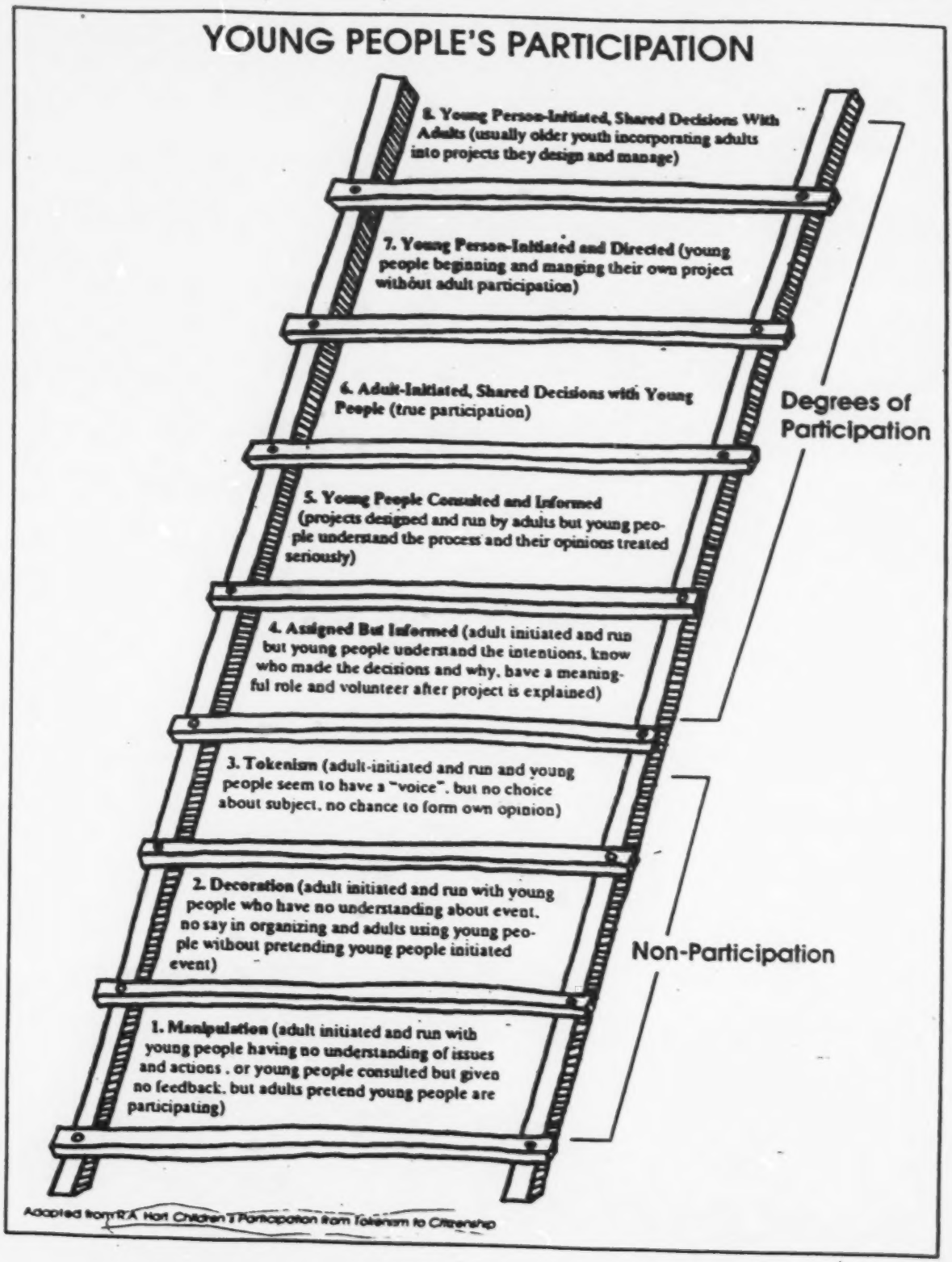
helps them gain affirmation and power. In his article, Hal Ogburn emphasizes that organizations working with youth should give priority to marginalized youth who have fewer opportunities and face more social and economic problems. (95) McGillicuddy adds, "While all youth need and benefit from a sense of individual and community empowerment, this approach is essential for youth who receive inferior services and decreased opportunities because of where they live or who they are." (98) The lack of opportunities available to some marginalized youth explains why they engage in harmful activities that help them fulfill their needs and attain competencies. Youth participation in youth development projects offers them an alternative to gang activity. McGillicuddy explains, "We are failing young people if we do not provide them with an opportunity to critique and change injustices they see around them. Youth participation strategies must value and support this goal, or youth will quickly see the effort as insincere and their participation as tokenism." (McGillicuddy, 98) Since the term youth participation is in fashion, it is often utilized in a misleading manner.

"Youth participation, it seems, is a term ripe for exploitation by those looking for cheap bones to toss in the direction of youth." (Pittman, 85) In this statement Pittman warns against the misuse of the term youth participation by organizations eager to follow the popular development trends in a superficial manner. In order to prevent this, youth participation and its various levels need to be defined. Pittman explains, "The goal of youth participation should be to teach and charge young people to define and articulate concerns of interest to them and to design and negotiate and implement solutions to those concerns." (89)

In order to achieve this goal, the process of youth participation requires the involvement of youth in program design and implementation. Organizations need to determine how they want to involve youth in their projects, and how they will select the youth participants. In the illustrated ladder of young people's participation, Hart discusses the various levels of participation. (see chart on following page) The first five levels involve varying degrees of participation, whereas the last three levels are defined as non-participation. These three levels include tokenism where projects are adult-initiated and run; decoration where youth have no participation; and manipulation where youth have no participation, but the adults pretend that youth are participating. The first five levels of participation include the following: young person initiated, shared decisions with adults; young person-initiated and directed no adult participation; adult initiated and shared decisions with youth; young people consulted and informed; and adult initiated and run but young play are informed and are involved in the project. The key aspect that Hart's ladder highlights is that there are different levels of adult and youth participation. It is important that there is a balance between the adult and youth involvement. Hart noted, "Young or old, real participation is achieved only when those involved are informed, consulted and ideally, encouraged to decide and manage."

In order to determine at what level youth should be involved, Karen Pittman explains it is important for organizations to decide whether youth should be heard, represented, involved, or in control. Another important question is whether youth should be involved in the organization or should there special events such as youth rallies, or special youth run events to involve them. McGillicuddy responds to Pittman's essay by

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION


8. Young Person-Initiated, Shared Decisions With Adults (usually older youth incorporating adults into projects they design and manage)
7. Young Person-Initiated and Directed (young people beginning and manging their own project without adult participation)
6. Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Young People (true participation)
5. Young People Consulted and Informed (projects designed and run by adults but young people understand the process and their opinions treated seriously)
4. Assigned But Informed (adult initiated and run but young people understand the intentions, know who made the decisions and why, have a meaningful role and volunteer after project is explained)
3. Tokenism (adult-initiated and run and young people seem to have a "voice", but no choice about subject, no chance to form own opinion)
2. Decoration (adult initiated and run with young people who have no understanding about event, no say in organizing and adults using young people without pretending young people initiated event)
1. Manipulation (adult initiated and run with young people having no understanding of issues and actions, or young people consulted but given no feedback, but adults pretend young people are participating)
Degrees of Participation
Non-Participation

Adapted from R.A. Hart Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship

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noting that youth need to be involved in defining and interpreting youth participation. She adds that young people have "energy, creativity and expertise" so they should not be considered the leaders of the future, but rather leaders of today. She explains, "They often have a better handle on what specific problems youth are facing, what programs should and should not do to better work with young people, and how to market activities and information to youth." (MacGillicuddy, 96)

V. Practical Application of Youth Participation: Three Case Studies

The three case studies that describe youth development projects with youth participation components illustrate the youth participation principles explained in the last section. The three projects described in this section include Youth Forums in Ecuador, Gente Joven in Mexico and CEMSE/MINKA in Bolivia.

A. Youth Forums in Ecuador

Fundacion Esquel-Ecuador started the Youth Forums in 1992 to provide Ecuadorian youth with a vehicle to voice their demands and concerns. These forums have involved approximately 15,000 youth from low-income neighborhoods and other youth organizations. With declining social and economic conditions, the Ecuadorian government needed to establish a policy to address the development of Ecuadorian youth. Past government efforts had little success in integrating youth into government institutions and programs. Modesto Rivas, who works with Esquel's youth programs, explained, "Esquel saw the need to create a space in which young people can express themselves freely,

without censure, and participate in the search for alternatives for their own development." (Wray, 7)

Rivas added that by involving youth through direct participation, they realized that they knew very little about them. The scarce literature that existed was from the adult perspective. Their first youth forum attracted approximately 150 young people. This forum proved the inaccuracy of the myth that young people are unwilling to participate in the country's development, but rather they just needed adequate spaces and opportunities to participate. Youth forums function regularly in four cities. The youth from each city decide on the theme of their forum.

At the national level, Fundacion Esquel-Ecuador, UNICEF and the Programma del Muchacho Trabajador, sponsored a National Youth Summit which developed from a series of local youth forums. This type of event involves youth by helping them to organize to voice their concerns in a proposal that was presented to presidential candidates. The two main themes discussed were education and work in the context of poverty, corruption and violence. (Wray, 7) However, the article did not discuss whether these youth are involved in any specific projects besides expressing their concerns. This foundation does not involve youth within their organization, but rather just provides them an opportunity to express their concerns by facilitating and organizing these forums. According to Hart's ladder of participation, this project would probably be categorized at level five, where young people are consulted and informed, but do not take part in the organization's decision-making process.

B. Gente Joven

Mexfam, a reproductive health care organization, established in Mexico in 1965, came to the realization that adolescents faced severe problems, such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. Instead of replicating their programs catering to adults for adolescents, they acknowledged that they needed to take a different approach with adolescents.

The Gente Joven program was intended to bring information on sex education and family planning to adolescents living in the marginal urban areas of Mexico. From 1986 to 1988, Mexfam established 13 adolescent centers, and Mexfam staff and Gente Joven promoters, who were young volunteers, tried to motivate youth to come to the centers. As Marques explained, "For the limited number of young people the centers reached the initiative proved useful, but the numbers were small and the cost per teenager very high." (5) They also realized that adolescents enjoyed playing active roles, and needed to be more involved in the process.

Mexfam's evaluation of the Gente Joven program led to the closing of the centers, and the establishment of an outreach program. "The program has shifted its perspective from trying to make young people approach Mexfam to taking the program to places where adolescents get together." (Marques, 6) They also adapted the program to suit the different needs of young people in school, at work, and on the streets. They realized that boys and girls also needed to be targeted differently.

In order to do outreach effectively, Gente Joven recruited high school students between the ages of 16 and 20 to volunteer going out to outreach sites with coordinators. All promoters participate in 14 training sessions on the subjects that are covered in the workshops. In addition to involving young people as promoters, the program also realized that young people needed to be involved in the communication process because "how" the message is communicated is more vital than the message itself. "Traditional brochures and manuals on sexuality for young people tend to focus on describing reproductive anatomy and biological processes. But this seems to be an adult approach to sexuality: overtly intellectual, artificially out of context and lacking emotion." (Marques:8) Young people place more emphasis on the emotional aspects of the situation. They also tend to understand the information better if it is placed in the real life context.

The program now goes to factories, schools and the streets to share their message. In addition, they host a radio show to offer information on sexuality in a light, humorous way. The program called "Estrenando Cuerpo" (getting used to own's body) also combines modern music with commentary on adolescent sexuality and relationships. Mexfam also incorporates young people's perspectives by consulting them on the effectiveness of their educational materials, such as pamphlets and videos. "For Mexfam, young people's participation in the production of program materials is essential to ensure that the right message is being transmitted in the most understandable and useful way." (Marques, 16) However, after years of working with adolescents, the organization realizes that there are differences within the youth community, not only in terms of the socio-economic levels and cultural differences, but also gender differences.

This project can be categorized at level six on Hart's ladder of participation because even though the project is adult-initiated, youth are involved in decision-making process for certain issues, such as the effectiveness of their communication materials. Youth who volunteer as promoters also benefit from the training and practical experience provided to them. The organization and community benefits from this youth participation because their programs have a higher degree of effectiveness.

C. CEMSE/MINKA

In order to encourage student participation, CEMSE (Centro de Multiservicios Educativos), a Bolivian non-governmental organization that provides support to public schools, helped students to organize an umbrella organization called Associacion Estudiantil MINKA. It started out as a mutual fund that permitted students to buy educational supplies at discounted rates. However, MINKA's limited role expanded into a youth organization that promoted the value of indigenous culture. As Kevin Healy explains in his article, the impetus for this change came from the realization that even though the youth came from traditional cultures and spoke their native language Aymara at home, they were being taught to look down on their culture at school. "The public schools were not only providing them with an inferior technical education but treating their traditional culture as a handicap to overcome rather than a foundation to build upon." (Healy, 40)

The students organized themselves by electing representatives to a student council that participated in CEMSE's high-level planning sessions, and joined community council

meetings with parents and teachers. They also challenged CEMSE to go beyond assisting schools to changing them to be more multicultural. This process was led by 25 students who were selected to be "animadores juveniles" (youth organizers). They received five months of training in nonformal communication techniques, social research for revalorizing local cultures, and workshop planning.

In addition to youth organizers, MINKA also has cultural brigades with a membership of approximately 350 youth at the elementary, junior high and high school levels. They organize traditional and contemporary music workshops and concerts. They also help students to restore pride in their own cultural heritage by critically discussing how they can learn from their ancestors to fight against the remnants of colonization that continue to devalue their cultures. During the remembrance of the 500 years since the arrival of Columbus in October 1992, MINKA organized a series of educational events and a cultural fair to explore the richness of indigenous cultures, and educate people to revalorize their own cultures.

MINKA offers an excellent example of an organization where youth participation benefitted not only the youth participants and their organization, but also their community. The youth were offered assistance by CEMSE to organize, and get involved in the decision-making body of their organization. A limited number of youth received extensive training in order to work as youth organizers. However, these 25 youth were able to work effectively with many more youth that benefitted from their involvement with the organization. Through the cultural brigades more youth at different age levels became involved with MINKA. One of the major strengths of the organization is that youth

reflected on their own experience and formulated activities based on these ideas, instead of just engaging in activities predetermined by adults. For example, the youth realized that their culture needed to be revalorized so they organized traditional music workshops and concerts, and held activities during the remembrance of 500 years of colonization.

At the individual level, the youth benefit from their participation not only in terms of the skills they acquire, but also from gaining a sense of fulfillment from their participation in community activities. Organizationally, they contribute their energy and talent to MINKA and CEMSE, and in the process empower themselves. MINKA helps CEMSE to "empower" the people that they were trying to "help" in the past. Finally, at the community level, MINKA helps to raise awareness about indigenous cultures, and the need to fight against colonial attitudes that denigrate local cultures.

The MINKA project can be categorized at level seven on Hart's ladder since it does involve youth initiated and directed activities. However, its origins in CEMSE are in level six, adult initiated and shared decisions with youth. In comparison to the other two case studies, this project provides more opportunities for youth participants. In fact, this project comes closer to empowerment than the other two projects. The benefits for the organization and their community seem quite obvious in terms of the youth involvement in organizing activities for the 500 years of resistance, and revalorizing indigenous cultures.

VI. Conclusion

Youth participation takes places at both the organizational and community levels. The case studies illustrate that the higher the level on Hart's ladder, the more opportunities youth will have to acquire competencies through their participation. Within youth development organizations, adults need to share their power with youth, and establish partnerships with youth. McGillicuddy explains, "Rather than continuing to see ourselves as youth saviors or protectors, it means recognizing youth as our partners, who will learn from us but will also teach us a great deal about where we have been and where we should go." (96) With this recognition, youth participation becomes a essential component for effective youth development projects.

In addition to involving youth, organizations also need to involve their families in order to be effective in the long-term. "Traditional intervention schemes fail to acknowledge the inter-related problems of youth and families. Some agencies are beginning to collaborate with each other to develop more comprehensive solutions, but they fail to engage parents, communities and youth as equal partners, thus defeating the full benefits of collaboration." (Hancock, 141) Developing this equal partnership is in the interest of the youth, the organization and the communities. Zeldin explains that adolescent development occurs when young people take on complex roles and responsibilities in multiple settings. (8) Youth participation offers youth an opportunity to not only develop themselves, but also their communities. "The active participation of youth is essential to re-energizing and sustaining the civic spirit of communities. Through skills development in the areas of collaboration and leadership, and the application of these capacities to meaningful roles in the community, youth can play a fundamental role in addressing the social issues that are destined to impact their lives and those of future generations." (Hancock, 141)

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